

Ottawa will see pushback if tow trucks are forced to clear blockades, towing industry says

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Trucks block a downtown road as truckers and their supporters continue to protest against COVID-19 vaccine mandates in Ottawa, on Feb. 15.

PATRICK DOYLE/REUTERS

The tow-truck industry says the federal government will be met with resistance if it tries to use Emergencies Act powers to force operators to clear blockades and protest sites against

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-ottawa-will-see-pushback-if-tow-trucks-are-forced-to-clear-blockades/>

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their will.

At a press conference Monday, Justice Minister David Lametti specifically cited tow trucks as one of the essential services that the government could direct, under this act, “to relieve impacts of blockades on Canada’s economy.”

“I can tell you that there’s going to be a lot of pushback if they do,” Joey Gagne, president of Abrams Towing Services, a 200-truck operation based in Southern Ontario, said Tuesday.

Abrams has a fleet of roughly 20 tow trucks in Ottawa, where anti-vaccine mandate demonstrations have brought the downtown core to a standstill for close to three weeks. But Mr. Gagne says he has no intention of getting involved with the protest, because it’s not worth the safety risks.

“Everybody’s pretty much on the same page about not wanting to do it. Because they think that there’s going to be damage, either to their business or equipment or people,” he said.

Mark Graves, who runs the Provincial Towing Association of Ontario, said his members have been inundated with requests from the city and police to tow protester vehicles – all prior to the Emergencies Act being invoked on Monday – and the response has been a unanimous no.

“It would be business suicide,” he said. “These are the trucking companies that call you for the work when they break down on the side of the road. You think ... they’re ever going to call you again? You may as well just write your own ticket to shut your business down.”

He said the PTAO has sought legal advice on what powers the government will have to compel private companies to act.

“There’s a difference between essential services and essential services that are government funded. We’re not government funded whatsoever,” he said. “I don’t know that they can mandate a private industry to do anything.”

It has been a turbulent few years for the towing industry, which in addition to the pandemic has also been under the spotlight for violence and corruption. A [2020 Globe and Mail investigation revealed](https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-ottawa-will-see-pushback-if-tow-trucks-are-forced-to-clear-blockades/) that dozens of tow trucks were burned and at least four men with ties to the industry had been killed across the Greater Toronto Area, as companies competed for bigger slices of a lucrative segment of the industry known as collision towing

or “accident chasing.”

Data leak reveals Canadians, Americans donated millions to fund convoy protests

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Corruption investigations followed, leading to dozens of arrests, both of tow-truck drivers and also police officers across the province. The Ontario government has since pledged to licence and regulate the industry, but those efforts have been hampered by the pandemic.

“Our industry is struggling like many other industries,” Doug Nelson, executive director of the Ontario Recovery Group and the Canadian Towing Association, said. He is concerned about security risks with confronting protesters.

“This is not our fight,” he said.

The government has so far declined to use military tow trucks.

Daniel Le Bouthillier, a spokesperson for the Department of National Defence, said the military’s towing equipment is not located near any of the blockades or protests. He said the army has a fleet of 11 armoured recovery vehicles located at military locations, and most of the vehicles are in either Edmonton or Gaagetown, N.B.

Asked whether this equipment would be brought in, Daniel Minden, a spokesperson for Defence Minister Anita Anand, cited Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who said Monday that the Emergencies Act “in no way brings in the military as a solution against Canadians. We are empowering law enforcement, and I think that’s what Canadians want to see.”

The City of Ottawa has said it has acquired access to some tow trucks owned by OC Transpo, the local public transit commission.

Similar challenges have arisen as protests pop up in other parts of the country. The RCMP said this week that removal of trucks and other vehicles from a protest in southern Alberta was being hampered by towing companies that did not want to get involved.

“Unfortunately [the towing companies contacted said] they were unwilling to become involved when it was implied that helping law enforcement with removal would likely damage their livelihoods into the future,” RCMP Deputy Commissioner Curtis Zablocki said.

Don Getschel, president of the Towing and Recovery Association of Alberta, said it is up to individual towing operators and companies to decide whether to help police dismantle blockades. However, he said his association has already informed the RCMP and government officials that most of his members do not want to get involved, because of the negative feedback and threats some towing companies have received for helping police.

He said some towing companies in Alberta have also received praise for staying on the sidelines.

“They were receiving e-mails from all over the world,” he said. “I was reading some of the e-mails, from New Zealand, Australia, all over the United States, United Kingdom. This is on the world stage, this whole blockade. There’s a lot of people watching.”

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